

By Governor Haley Barbour

Americans are alarmed about the current federal efforts to change health care, and for good reason. After all it not only represents eighteen percent of the U.S. economy, the health care system literally involves life and death decisions.

The White House and other proponents of a government-run health care system claim the concerns about and protests against the various proposals pending in Congress are politically generated and intended to hurt the President's popularity. This is simply not the case.

Citizens, whether seniors or medical providers, have received little solid information as proposals have changed and major differences have emerged in House and Senate versions. What we do know, however, is all plans contain large cuts (hundreds of billions of dollars) in Medicare spending and large tax increases (hundreds of billions of dollars more) that fall very heavily on small businesses. No wonder people are concerned, and that concern is exacerbated by the Democratic leadership's attempts to force passage of this complicated, life-changing legislation by artificial deadlines.

It took Obama six months to pick out a family dog. Cramming health care reform down the country's throat in a fraction of that time scares people who have been told, accurately, the various bills contain a billion dollar combination of tax increases and Medicare spending cuts.

During a deep recession, when most people believe job creation and economic growth should be top priorities, huge tax increases on small businesses, whether in the form of an additional eight percent payroll tax, or a \$750 per employee fee, or a 5.4 percent income tax surcharge, make no sense. When the government makes it more expensive to employ people, employers will employ fewer people.

And Democrats shouldn't be surprised that proposals to cut back on Medicare spending scare seniors. Democrats ran full-fledged "Mediscare" campaigns against Republicans in the 90's when we proposed increasing Medicare spending at a slower rate, i.e., "cutting Medicare."

This is not about party politics. Neither is the bipartisan opposition of governors who fear the expansion of Medicaid, as provided in both House and Senate proposals, will result in enormous unfunded mandates being placed on state governments. States simply do not have the resources to assume tens of billions of dollars of new costs to cover an expansion of the Medicaid program as a device to give "health insurance" to some people.

Good citizens, Democrats and Independents as well as Republicans, are telling Washington to slow down. Everything this year has been "too far, too fast, too soon, too much", and too many trillions and trillions of dollars. It's time to slow down.

Americans want to know the facts and the effects of the various bills and proposals. They want to hear a lot more about the Medicare savings, the tax increases, the mandates and the regulatory system. The twenty-two percent of Medicare beneficiaries who have chosen “Medicare Advantage” need to know if it will still be available and at what cost. People who want to keep their current plan need to have explained to them how that will be guaranteed if, five years from now, the federal commissioner of health care will have to approve any health plan before it can be sold in the U.S. How can these competing ideas be reconciled?

And, folks can’t understand how a proposal proponents claim will control health care costs doesn’t include tort reform. After all, litigation and the resulting practice of defensive medicine add tens of billions to the cost of health care.

In Mississippi we passed comprehensive tort reform in 2004, partially to stop lawsuit abuse in the area of medical liability. It worked. Medical liability insurance costs are down 42 percent, and doctors have received an average rebate of 20 percent of their annual paid premium. The number of medical liability lawsuits against Mississippi doctors fell almost ninety percent one year after tort reform went into effect. Doctors have quit leaving the state and limiting their practices to avoid lawsuit abuse.

If we are trying to make health care more affordable, how do you leave out tort reform?

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